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ABSTRACT

In the fifties and early sixties, United States colleges and universities shied away from courses about communist insurgencies because of the repressive influence of McCarthyism. Vietnam was eliminated from classroom investigation, forcing students to take the issues to the streets. In an effort to expose and examine issues that arose from the United States' involvement in Vietnam, Dundalk Community College in Baltimore developed a course, "Reading and Writing about Vietnam," which may act as a useful model for other campuses. The course's success was due to three crucial factors: (1) careful thought was given to the goals and purposes of the course, which was designed to be comprehensive and interdisciplinary, focusing on both personal and international political dimensions of the war; (2) students from diverse backgrounds, including Vietnam veterans, were actively recruited through an extensive publicity campaign and individualized letters; and (3) an instructional process was implemented that allowed participants to express strong feelings about Vietnam and to move beyond those feelings. Journal writing and class discussions, as well as essay assignments, guest speakers, and a research project were among the instructional methods used in the course. The course reading list and titles of films used are included. (EJV)

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VIETNAM IN THE CLASSROOM:

Fact, Fiction and Truth

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VIETNAM IN THE CLASSROOM: FACT, FICTION AND TRUTH

Karen Olson

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In 1983 Americans marked the 10th Anniversary of the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Vietnam. With lingering uncertainty about the virtues of that war, we erected a monument to the men and women who died in Southeast Asia and acknowledged the war as history with television documentaries and book-length monographs. As the animosities between supporters and protesters have subsided, however, the fading of memory of our agony in Southeast Asia leaves us vulnerable to repeating past mistakes. In the fifties and early sixties American colleges and universities shied away from courses about communist insurgencies because of the repressive influence of McCarthyism. Vietnam was studiously eliminated from classroom investigation, forcing students to take the issue to the streets. There is no doubt that left-wing insurgencies will continue to erupt in Third World countries well into the next century. Can we as educators and citizens learn from Vietnam some

of what we need to know to make thoughtful and informed foreign policy decisions about Latin America, or Africa, or the Philippines? Can we, at the same time that we are being unflinchingly critical about our role in Vietnam, take sufficient national responsibility for that war to effectively reintegrate Vietnam veterans into our society? Can we recognize their acts of heroism and courage at the same time that we acknowledge their difficulties as the often confused victims of a war we lost and, perhaps, should not have fought.

Our own efforts to develop a course about the Vietnam war at Dundalk Community College in Baltimore, Maryland, proved successful and encouraging and might provide a useful model to others. "Reading and Writing About Vietnam" evolved out of the personal and professional commitments of two colleagues, John Low from the English Department and Karen Whitman from the History Department. Our success in conducting this course was due to three crucial factors: We gave very careful thought to the purposes of the course and were clear about what we hoped to accomplish. We actively recruited students who were diverse in their backgrounds and eager to examine difficult issues. And we established an instructional process that allowed all participants in the course to express the strong feelings they had about Vietnam but also enabled them to move beyond those feelings and examine the issues in a rigorous and dispassionate way. Let us be more specific about the organization of the course.

Goals and Purposes: Both instructors had been active opponents of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the 1960's. We had also encountered

many Vietnam veterans in our decade of community college teaching. We felt passion about Vietnam and that turned out to be an asset because we taught the course as an issue that is alive and troublesome, rather than as past history, finished and complete.

We determined that our goals for "Reading and Writing About Vietnam" would be multidimensional:

1. As the title indicates, we saw the course as an exploration of a very complex topic, rather than a definitive statement on some limited aspect of the war.
2. We decided to take an interdisciplinary approach, to look at the war from many different angles, using history, literature, film, journalism, and personal accounts.
3. We wanted to work on two levels simultaneously, to study the international political dimensions of Vietnam but also to listen to the voices of G.I.s from Indianapolis and peasants from the Mekong Delta. We hoped to make some connection between personal experiences and their political implications.
4. We hoped that the course would allow veterans and other students to sort out feelings, but we didn't want (and couldn't have managed) a therapy group.
5. We wanted a rigorous examination of the most significant issues raised by the Vietnam war: What is the nature of the Cold War? What do we know about the characteristics of communist insurgencies in Vietnam and elsewhere? What assumptions and decisions catapulted the U.S. into a major, undeclared war in Southeast Asia? What were the effects of that war on U.S.

foreign policy, on the men and women who fought there and on the Vietnamese nation?

Recruitment: "Reading and Writing About Vietnam?" was widely publicized and open to any interested students. It was clear, however, that accomplishing our goals would require recruiting thoughtful students who had a variety of perspectives on the war. Going through rosters from previous semesters, we sent individual letters to 50 students--male and female, black and white, young and not-so-young --describing the course and its goals and urging them to enroll.

The class we ended up with was diverse, serious, and, on occasion, profoundly challenging. Our fifteen students included three Vietnam veterans with sharply contrasting experiences of the war and its consequences. Rick had been badly wounded and was attending a community college as part of a rehabilitation plan. The violence he experienced in Vietnam was not unlike the recurring violence that erupted in his large Hispanic family. He was and is struggling to get training and a job despite enormous medical problems and a history of drug abuse. At the time of the dedication of the Vietnam memorial his letter to the editor, published in THE WASHINGTON POST, ended on this note: "Not in all cases, but in many, the courageous soldier of yesterday is the broken man of today. This recognition is long overdue and for some a little too late."

John went to Vietnam from a patriotic working-class community, and returned to become a militant activist in Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He went on to get a bachelor's degree in history and a professional job in industry. He had read about our course in the newspaper and seized the opportunity to re-examine his own quixotic

history as a soldier and a protester. He wrote poetry about Vietnam throughout the semester and was frustrated by the less sensitive, know-nothing attitudes of some other vets.

George was assigned to Vietnam after the U.S. had officially stopped sending troops there. He was full of Catch-22 stories, and when a badly crippled former officer addressed our class, George vented all of his enlisted man's anger, showing no deference to the wheelchair. George was the most expressive of the three veterans; he shared the internal process of re-examination most forthrightly, and rewarded us at the end of the semester by announcing, "I served in Vietnam for a year and I never knew until I took this course what that war was all about."

The middle-aged wife of a psychiatrist brought to the course her perspective as a private citizen who had supported the war effort in its early stages. As much as the Vietnam veterans in the class wanted to know why they had fought in Southeast Asia, Catherine wanted to know how the American democratic process made it possible for us to get so deeply embroiled. She also attempted to unravel the tension between her own generally patriotic sensibilities and her determination, by the late 1960's, that none of her children would go to Vietnam.

We were pretty close to a cross-section once you add a black steelworker, a quality control analyst from McCormick Spice, and some younger students who had no experience of Vietnam in their backgrounds. Having gathered together such an interesting group of students we made efforts to establish an atmosphere that would enable us to trust one another emotionally and intellectually.

Journal-writing was our most effective tool in establishing trust and thoughtfulness. We asked students to keep a journal, and to make several entries each week in response to reading assignments, films, comments by other students, and questions that were raised in their own minds. At the same time we made it clear that we were keeping parallel journals. In class, all of us wrote in our journals at the beginning of discussions or at any point when we felt a need to stop and reflect or clarify the confusion we had stirred up for each other. We paused frequently during the semester to read aloud from the journals.

The instructors generated discussion questions and topics that were designed to summarize information, express personal feelings, clarify positions, or identify alternatives. For example, when we got bogged down in a debate about whether or not the U.S. could have won in Vietnam, we asked everyone to write in his or her journal for ten minutes to respond to the following question: "How much would you have been willing to spend to win the war in Vietnam? State your answer specifically in terms of the amount of money, the number of American lives, and the number of Vietnamese lives." This journal-writing exercise forced each of us to go beyond our rhetoric and make a precise individual commitment.

On another occasion, when we ran into apparent contradictions among our various source materials, we worked out a very useful process for determining reliability. First we agreed on a definition of reliable, and then each of us rank ordered our eight sources, beginning with the most reliable and ending with the least reliable. Given the diversity of the class, the lists were significantly different, and a comparison led to an enlightening discussion of whom do you trust and why.

Often after a writing session, we simply asked if anyone wanted to read his or her entry; occasionally we went around the room and each read part of what he or she had written. We all listened to readers without commenting or judging, and this established a pattern. Thoughtful opinions could be extended without fear of disapproval, and disagreement wasn't threatening because we had a mechanism for presenting discordant statements without attacking one another.

There are very fine materials available on the Vietnam war (more now than when we taught the course), and we chose for our course a sampling that gave students a solid background in the historical developments surrounding the war as well as an introduction to some of the best literary, philosophical and political writing about Vietnam. We used films to explore the propaganda postures of hawks and doves, and brought in speakers who were active in current Vietnam-related issues. Following are the specific materials we used:

- America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, by George C. Herring, was our basic historical text.
- Philip Caputo's memoir, A Rumor of War, provided an example of the excellent and polemical journalism that came out of the war.
- Going After Cacciato, by Tim O'Brien, represented one of the many outstanding novels that have been published by Vietnam veterans.
- The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam, edited by A. D. Horne, provided several essays by Vietnam veterans about the political issues that the war raised for them.

- Our films included The Sixties, a ten-minute montage of images from the 1960's; Why We Are in Vietnam, the Pentagon movie justifying U.S. involvement in Vietnam; Hearts and Minds, the classic anti-war film; The Anderson Platoon, a documentary about a black unit in Vietnam; and Coming Home, an example of the presentation of Vietnam war themes in the popular culture by opponents of the war.
- Speakers who came into our class included a former officer who applauded our efforts in Vietnam, and a former anti-war activist who deplored them; a counselor from a veteran's center who discussed problems of Vietnam veterans; and two members of the Christopher Foundation who described a recent trip to Vietnam and the efforts of the Vietnamese to recover from the war. In addition, several students brought in information and petitions about the M I A issue and presented them to the class.

Our final assignment was a 5-10 page research paper on some specific aspect of the war, which served for many of our students as an opportunity to make their own definitive statements about the significance and consequences of the war in Southeast Asia.

At the conclusion of "Reading and Writing About Vietnam" students and instructors alike knew that we had looked that war full in the face. Intellectually we were satisfied that our exploration of the issues had been both wide and deep. As human beings we had listened carefully to experiences and points-of-view alien to our own. And as citizens we were certain that we would be among those who would take responsibility for thoughtful judgment the next time our country went to war.